DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 105 763 FL 006 857

AUTHOR Light, Richard L.; Warshawsky, Diane
TITLE Preliminary Error Analysis: Russians Using English.
PUB DATE Oct 74
NOTE 10p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS College Students; Contrastive Linguistics; Determiners (Languages); *English (Second Language); *Error Patterns; Idiors; *Interference (Language Learning); Language Development; Language Instruction; Learning Processes; Learning Theories; Psycholinguistics; Russian; *Second Language Learning; *Structural Analysis
IDENTIFIERS *Error Analysis

ABSTRACT

This paper reports results of a preliminary analysis of the errors made by Russian exchange students learning English at S.U.N.Y. in Albany. Error samples are taken from a taped panel discussion containing prepared and spontaneous speech, from a TOEFL test, and from a quiz. Errors are divided into intralingual, or those reflecting general characteristics of rule learning, and developmental, or those illustrating attempts to build hypotheses about English from limited knowledge. Most of the errors were of the intralingual type. An area of specific difficulty was the use of the article; this is shown to be due to a confusion about English syntax, rather than interference from Russian. Problems of interference from French and Spanish are also examined. The structural approach is suggested as a possible source of error, as well as the practice of having idioms memorized without attention to their syntactic contexts. (AM)

ED105763

Preliminary Error Analysis: Russians Using English

Richard L. Light and Diane Warshawsky

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

In the past few years, researchers in second language acquisition have followed the lead of their colleagues in first language acquisition and have begun to use the errors made by students of foreign languages as data which through analysis will hopefully lead to a clearer understanding of the process of acquiring a second language. In the past, errors were viewed as an inevitable product of interference from the native language, but little attention was directed to other possible sources of learners' errors. Richards, in his article "A Non-Contrastive Approach to Error Analysis" (English Language Teaching, 25 (1971), 204-219.) discusses errors which originate in the structure of the English language and in the "strategies by which a second language is acquired and taught." He defines intralingual errors as "those which reflect the general characteristics of rule learning, such as faulty generalization, incomplete application of rules, and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply" and developmental errors as those which "illustrate the learner attempting to build up hypotheses about the English language from his limited experience of it in the classroom or textbook."

This paper is the result of a preliminary analysis of the errors made by the Russian exchange students at SUNYA. The errors have been taken for the most part from the tape of a panel the students gave on Soviet Education. Most of their speech on this tape consisted of their answers to questions which they had prepared in advance and for which they used notes. A small part of the tape consisted of spontaneous questions from the audience and spontaneous responses from the Russians. On the whole, there were very few errors probably due in part to the nature of the presentation and certainly attributable in large part to the very advanced level of the students. The remaining errors were drawn from the TOEFL Test, primarily the parts on English Structure and Writing Ability, and from a quiz which the students took as part of their day-to-day course work at the University.

FL006557

Many of the errors were of the intralingual variety; that is, they probably were a product of a problematic area of English syntax. The most frequent error observed was the incorrect use of the definite and indefinite articles. The errors were of two types: use of an article where none would be required in standard English or omission of the article in obligatory contexts. Russian has no articles at all, and a single form (e.g. the Russian equivalent of apple) would be used to render the English forms "the apple", "an apple", and "apple." It is tempting,

therefore, to write off the students' errors as interference from Russian and leave it at that. If the students had consistently omitted the article in all contexts, then a good case could be made for the transfer hypothesis. This was in fact not true; the students used articles throughout, sometimes erroneously, and they sometimes omitted the article where English would require it. Since ∅ article is a possibility in English, however, this is not necessarily a product of interference from the native language, but rather a product of confusion in dealing with the English system itself.

Certainly, in the case of the misuse of the articles, we must look not to the native language but to the target language, English, to explain the problem. Something that doesn't exist can hardly be said to interfere. In order to clarify this point, let's imagine that instead of Russians , we had Frenchmen providing us with errors, and that the sentence in question were "The love is very important." Then, we might be justified in calling the error an interference error, because it at least superficially is a literal translation of the French structure in which the article is obligatory with abstract nouns such as "love". A Frenchman learning English could, conceivably, use definite and indefinite articles while speaking English, without having achieved the slightest insight into the rules and restrictions governing the English system of articles; all he would have to know is expressable by le, la, les = the ; un, une = a and he then would have achieved a sort of functional competence which would produce correct sentences part of the time and deviant ones at other times. This is an extreme case of interference of the native language, since it is a conscious strategy on the part of the learner.

The Russians, however, if they use the articles at all, are in more of a bind. They cannot translate non-existent Russian articles, and must therefore come to terms with the rules and restrictions to the rules which govern the use of articles in English. Since the rules are often elusive, the probability for errors increases. The following are some errors which, in our opinion, could derive from the complexities of the English article systems rather than from interference. They point the failure on the part of the learner to learn particular restrictions to rules.

ERROR: "They take language and foreign language."
"Children are taught alphabet, they are taught reading, they are taught counting..."

Notice that in English, the "subject matter" is generally not preceded by the article, even when it is qualified (e.g. she takes speed reading)

ERROR: "...provide the country with workers in engineering, metallurgical industry, chemical industry, construction..."

Let's look at what is possible: provide the country with workers in engineering
provide the country with workers in chemical engineerin
provide the country with workers in construction
provide the country with workers in heavy constructi-n
provide the country with workers in industry
provide the country with workers in heavy industry
BUT *provide the country with workers in chemical industry
oil industry
metallurgical industry

ERROR: "...we study the scientific communism, scientific socialism and political economy of capitalism."

Again, we can say: We study communism.
We study scientific communism.
We study economy.
We study political economy.
BUT* We study political economy of capitalism.

ERROR: (from TOEFL test, a multiple-choice response) "Yes, and very unpleasant thirty minutes it was."

This is a very strange use of the indefinite article "a" since it is used with a plural "thirty minutes" , here taken to be a unit of time. Again we see the failure to learn the particular conditions of a rule. In this case of course the rule is very generalizable and the condition is very particular, and so we might expect this error to persist even in the speech of students as advanced as these.

Many of the errors in the use of the article did consist of its omission in obligatory contexts. This might well be interference from Russian in the sense that articles might not be conceived of as crucial to meaning andso are overlooked. They don't "sense" that something is missing, in the sense that a speaker of English learning Spanish, for example, might "miss" subject pronouns or "miss" the copula in Hebrew or Russian. However, as already mentioned earlier, errors of omission might still be due to confusion about the in's and out's of English articles, since a ∅ article is also a possibility in the English system. The following are some of the omission-type errors:

ERRORS: "Ruble is approximately equivalent of dollar."
"The secondary school of general type just has general number of subjects."
"Thank you for attention."
"...just to be engaged in national economy."
"The status of the education which you receive in institute..."
"I attended dancing circle."

Another instance of a type of error which probably has its source in the complexity of the English system has to do with the ways of modifying a noun. The following sentence came from the tape: "...an art school, or a musical school, or a school of actor...". Here are three different ways of

*Asterisk indicates an ungrammatical sentence.

qualifying a noun in one sentence: N + N, adj. + N, N + Prep.P. There are conditions under which each of these combinations is correct: art school, music school, music box; musical person, musical chairs; a school of acting or an acting school. How to know? From the evidence, it appears to be difficult to know with certainty. Other examples of this type of error:

ERRORS: "sporting schools" (cf. the entirely acceptable "acting schools")
"lessons of physical culture"
"the secondary school of general type"
"the studies of the institute"
"extra-curriculum circles"

Errors such as "lessons of physical culture" or "the studies of the institute" could also stem from an analogy with such "genitive" structures as: "his place of work," "the size of the Earth," "the type of class," all perfectly acceptable English. This hypothesis is further supported by the fact that in Russian, both types of structures are rendered with the genitive: the true possessive ("the size of the Earth") as well as the others ("lessons of physical culture"). The students thus exhibit a faulty understanding of a distinction important in English.

In Russian, there is a single present tense which "translates" both the simple present and the present continuous in English. The Russian student learning English must learn the contexts which require one or the other, and to do this, he must rely on English since there is no corresponding system in Russian to "transfer." The following error from the tape reveals that for at least one student, the distinction as it exists in English is not entirely clear:

ERROR: "They write and they draw pictures, they're having rest, playing different games and toys."

Still another system absent in Russian, appears to be problematical for these students. This is the mass/count distinction in English. The following are examples of confusion in this area:

ERRORS: "I had a little bit more English classes."
"...a certain amount of marks..."
"a large amount of miles"
"much distance" (The last two were selected on a multiple-choice part of the TOEFL test)

[a long]

As a final example of an intralingual error, let's consider a case of overgeneralization of a rule. The students have apparently learned that adverbs take -ly in English, a very useful and workable generalization. However, it sometimes doesn't work and these two examples from the TOEFL test, the Writing Ability section, show that the students have formed a hypothesis about English based on a wealth of experience. On this part of

the exam, the student had to indicate which of several underlined possibilities in a sentence constituted an error. Three people saw late as an error in "The game ended late..." Four people did not perceive "straightly" as erroneous in "They went straightly home."

INSERT →

We will now turn to a consideration of errors which may be are traceable to some kind of transfer or interference. Since these students are also studying other languages besides English (French and Spanish), these languages constitute another source of interference. They might even interfere more than the native language, since they are less stable and more recently acquired. They are probably perceived as "similar" to English, certainly moreso than Russian, thereby increasing the interaction of the two languages. There were numerous errors which support this hypothesis and several which are ambiguous as to where the source of the interference is. The following are the errors and an attempted analysis:

ERRORS: "I think it is three years since they introduced..." (French, Spanish and Russian all have similar constructions using the present tense where English requires the present perfect.)

"He passes exams (French: Il passe des examens) and he gains..." (French: gagner Spanish: ganar = English gain, win, earn)

"At our faculty..." (French: faculté Spanish: facultad and Russian also has this word for English "college" or "department")

"There is a special body...which renders help to..." (French: rendre service)

"Somewhat 60% of total school time is passed on practical education." (French and Spanish: passer, pasar with time rather than "spend")

"34 million of members" (French: million de + Ncun) but Russian would require the genitive after the numbers 2,3, and 4--here: 34)

"dancing circle" ("circle" for club as in French cercle)

"the time where they worked" (French: le temps où ...)

Also, structures such as "lessons of physical culture" could be the result of interference from French or Spanish (lecons de culture physique; lecciones de cultura física). Of course the expression "physical culture" itself can be traced to all three languages.

"It's about three feet and ½" (like French trois pieds et demi; this one is of particular interest because the Russian structure is like the English.)

"Why not to try it anyway?" (like French Pourquoi pas l'essayer? which uses infinitive and also like the Russian; this might also represent an analogy with the English: "He decided not to try it.")

The last two items are from the TOEFL Test, multiple choice)

INSERT -- PAGE 5 ONE FINAL INTRALINGUAL ERROR

Russian does not distinguish between the relative pronouns for people and things, a distinction very important in English. The following error shows that the student has not mastered this distinction:

ERROR: "There is quite alot of studants which participate in scientific activities."

Some of the errors made by these students might be due to the type of training they have received or thestrategies they have adopted in learning English. For example, the structural approach which trains the students to fill in slots could lead to this error from the tape:

ERROR: "They continue to stay there from three up to six years of age."

In the sentence "They continue to + VERB" almost every verb in English qualifies for filling the VERB slot (read, write, speak, etc.) But there is a restriction on this rule— namely that verbs which already contain the semantic feature + continuity, let's call it, can't follow continue in the pattern without producing a redundancy of the worst kind. Other verbs in this highly restricted class are : continue, remain, and two-word verbs V + on. For example: *He continued to remain in Spain.
*He continued to drive on until dawn.

This could be classified as an intralingual error resulting from the failure to learn special conditions under which the rule does not apply.

Another pedagogical approach which might tend to produce errors is having students memorize idiomatic expressions as isolated units without enough attention to their syntactic contexts. This could lead to mistakes in production due to a mere memory failure or because of a failure to perceive anything systematic about the expression at all. Probably alot of expressions and even structures which are highly systematic as well are learned as holophrases.

ERROR: "They just have very good time there."

This was already discussed as a case of the omission of the indefinite article. It might also be classified as a production error. Very likely the expression was learned as an unanalyzed unit, almost as a series of syllables. Sort of like "Round John Virgin Mother and Child" or "My Country Tizuvthee".

Another example of this is in the sentence :

ERROR: "The matter is that I had been dancing for 11 years."

It sounds like a confusion of "The fact is that..." and "The fact of the matter is that...", probably learned as simple formulas. Similarly, the tollowing errors also strongly hint at a memorization strategy without any real understanding of the structure or feeling for the "system":

ERRORS: "...those students who cannot for this or that reason catch with the rest of the groups" (for "keep up with")

"The best way to help is in keeping out of the kitchen." ("in keeping with" learned as a holophrase)

"They're all made by hands." (memorized expression without analysis ; but not entirely asystematic: by ear, on foot, rule of thumb, hand over fist. This might also be the influence of Russian which would translate "with hands.")

(These last two examples are from the TOEFL Test; selected as multiple-choice items on English Structure section.)

When a student learns a language in the classroom, the input is usually very controlled. He learns selected structures, idioms, etc. He gains what has been called a communicative competence. At the end of this instruction, he may be very fluent, able to communicate all his needs, emotions, opionions, etc. in flawless English, even able to "pass" as a native speaker. However, his knowledge does not necessarily equal that of the native speaker because part of the native speaker's knowledge consists of being able to characterize a given utterance as deviant or non-devaint. When the foreign student is speaking, he is in control; he can use those structures he is sure of, that he has learned, andspeak good English. But on tests for which he is required to indicate whether a sentence is correct or incorrect, he may err, simply because of incomplete input. This is apparent on one item on the quiz. The student is asked to correct theincorrect sentences and to indicate which sentences are correct as is. Four students perceived one of the items as incorrect (it was correct) and three changed it in an acceptable way. In other words, they made a correct but unnecessary change.

Original Sentence: "She prefers talking with a person who will look her in the eye."
CHANGES: "...a person who looks her in the eye." (two students did this)
"She prefers to talk with a person..."

This is evidence of a "say what you are sure of" strategy which is a very effective one.

The fourth error was the following:

ERROR: "She prefers talking with a person who will look at her in the eye."

It looks like the result of some teacher's conscientious drilling of "look at", a generalization carried too far, but understandably so, since the class of exceptions is highly restricted: "look someone over," "look someone up and down" e.g.

There is a whole type of language behavior displayed by learners of a second language which cannot strictly be classified as incorrect, although it sometimes is accompanied by errors, but which is deviant in the sense that it is a preference for certain ways of expressing a given semantic content which are not the most frequent ways used by the native speaker. For example, let's consider the following sentences: "It is possible that he'll come"; "It is necessary that you be on time." Both are correct, but the native speaker would be more likely to say: "He might come";"You must be on time." This preference on the part of the learner,which can also be termed an avoidance of the modal system of English, probably represents interference of another language which prefers these impersonal constructions. (Il faut que vous arriviez a l'heure; Es posible que venga, etc.) The following is an example of this type of behavior taken from the tape:

ERROR: "It's not necessary that the subject should be in the program." (for: "The subject doesn't have to be in the program.")

The students make several errors which show that they confuse the modals in English, again probably intralingual errors. This could be the result of a training method which relies on translation or memorization rather than on really grappling with the system as it exists in English, learning the presuppositions governing the choice of a particular modal.

ERRORS: "After finishing such schools, the student should have state examinations." (instead of "must take")

"Now secondary education is obligatory so everybody should study for ten years." (instead of "has to.")

The above are preliminary interpretations of errors made early in the Russian students' stay at SUNY at Albany. We have used the errors as the basis for some instruction in the English as a second language classes for these students. We intend to continue analyzing their speech as a basis for both improving our instruction and for learning more about the processes utilized by Russians in learning English.